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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses generally Neil Simon's plays; specifically examines "God's Favorite," "Plaza Suite," "Barefoot in The Park," "Star Spangled Girl," "Come Blow Your Horn," and "Last of the Red Hot Lovers"; and quotes reviews of the plays. An examination of the composition of the plays reveals that they all more or less share certain topics and plot structure, have a veneer of topicality, and are supported by gags, jokes, and absurd behavior. Variations on the themes of unobtainable vain fantasies are played out; the plays all end in the marriage bed, however devious and deceitful the way has been. The vagaries of sex and guilt, inadequacy and machismo are all circumscribed and made manageable. It is concluded that Simon's plays are technically unsatisfying because he uses a disjointed tragicomic story line with an enormous number of realistic and cliche details and gags to distract from the disjointed story. His exploitation of the familiar prevents exploration of the serious or the comic. And, for the same reasons, the plays are thematically unsatisfying as well. (TS)

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A Rhetoric of American Popular Drama:
The Comedies of Neil Simon

Critical opinion of Neil Simon's plays during his fourteen years as a playwright has been, in general, mocking and pejorative; yet his plays, just as consistently have been box office hits. Almost all of them have been converted into films; and a television series, derived from The Odd Couple, has been running for several years. His plays are, in addition, the staple of Summer Theatres and Community Theatres. Seven of his plays are listed as "long runs," having achieved more than 500 continuous performances on Broadway. Simon's second play, Barefoot in the Park (1963), with a run of 1,530 performances, is 15th on that list of some 243 plays, not too far behind South Pacific, Oklahoma, My Fair Lady, Hello, Dolly, Life with Father, and Fiddler (the play that now tops the list with 3,242 performances). Simon's most recent play, God's Favorite, based on the Book of Job, opened in December, 1974, and, despite several unfavorable reviews, continues to run. Twice in his career, Simon was represented on Broadway with three and four plays running simultaneously. Not surprisingly, however, he never has won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award or the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

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Some recent reviews of Simon's latest play may suggest the problems involved. The epigraph for Walter Kerr's favorable review of God's Favorite reads: "Neil Simon has been more than clever. Would you go for diabolical?"[1] Kerr begins by defending Simon's take off of the Book of Job, suggesting that it is "material for broad farce." He calls it a satyr play, defining the genre for us as "a burlesque of harrowing tragic material." "Because the material is innately funny," Kerr continues, "it needs no profound original message of its own to deliver and [is] allowed an open-door policy on jokes...." He admits Simon's inclination for simple-reflex gags, even providing us with an example of one; but he invites us not to be deterred by them because, he says, God's Favorite doesn't function that way--from joke to joke.[2]

In describing a particular scene, Kerr uses actor's names rather than character names. This association of actor with character is especially apt in discussing Simon's plays, because a certain kind of sad-faced comic actor, a Walter Mathau for instance, or a Nancy Walker, does much to sustain the equivocal attitudes implicit in the plays. Kerr tells us that God's emissary, played by Charles Nelson Reilly, "a flutter of a fellow," comes by bicycle from Jackson Heights to deliver God's message to the American Job, Vincent Gardenia. We supposedly have learned earlier that the devil looks like Robert Redford.

> But Mr. Gardenia's family, huddled in parkas and stocking caps because the heat's gone off, hasn't

> (heard the news yet). It is inclined to be extremely dubious as Mr. Gardenia explains about messengers from Jackson Heights, devils, and all that. "The messenger saw the Devil?" asks son Terry Kiser with a curl of his lip. "What's he look like?" Mr. Gardenia doesn't answer immediately. He simply stands there, mouth open like a stapler that hasn't been punched yet, unable to speak the words that are so patently absurd. In his pause a laugh comes up, starting small and delayed and then expanding in discovery; it turns into a wave that engulfs the house. The audience is exactly as far ahead of Simon as Simon wants it to be; an accpted and rather strabysmic angle of vision is writing its own play, gags and all. Mr. Simon has been more than clever. Would you go for diabolical?

Jack Kroll offers an entirely different perspective of Simon's work:

> Like an annual outbreak of warts, the critic's yearly problem is back--what in God's name to do about Neil Simon? ...like that battered but unbowed institution [the Presidency], the institution called Neil Simon still stands, calmly flicking the critical pigeon droppings from his lapels. Nevertheless, here goes one more dive-bombing run right between

> Simon's spectacles. My megaton dropping this year is as follows: Neil Simon is just what we deserve.... As with all funny guys, Simon's real subject is the pain of it all. But unlike Chaplin, Keaton, Fields, the Marx Brothers, he does not detonate human experience into grenades of laughter whose shrapnel rips up the pomposity of homo sap. Instead, Simon trivializes experience with a shower of one-liners that tickle, sometimes hit a vulnerable spot, but never draw blood. Simon is the gagman laureate of the Age of Triviality.... In "The Odd Couple" Simon trivialized the pangs of divorce into the problem of using the washing machine; in "The Prisoner of Second Avenue" he trivialized urban anxiety into the annoyance of thin walls and faulty air-conditioning in high-rise apartment buildings.[3]

Kroll's examples of trivializing are both ridiculing devices and deceptions. For every problem, whether it be growing old or losing a job, getting married or divorced, Simon focuses--not on the problem--but on the physical surroundings of the setting and on the personal idiosyncracies of his stereotype characters. An apt example, in the third one-act of Plaza Suite, is the mother's concern, on her daughter's wedding day, for the run in her stocking and the need to keep up appearances. All during the scene the torn stocking gets more emphasis than the conflict between parents and daughter.

In direct contrast with Walter Kerr, Brendan Gill's response to God's Favorite is "one of indignation":

> I would have expected to content myself with reporting that, despite its having been written as a comedy, it amounts to a grim and often distressing medley of trumped-up, unfunny jokes, ill told and thoroughly unsuited to the action they purport to embody; instead, I find that I feel more strongly about the play than that. I find that it looms before me as a colossal impertinence--a jeer not at religion, though Mr. Simon in his ignorance manages to affront both Judaism and Christianity, but at literature.[4]

These few critics, whether they like or dislike Simon, do seem to suggest that he is in the service of the stock response and that he mixes his modes. Depending on the critic, Simon writes Boffo comedies or "bastard tragedies" when he should be writing satires.

One last quotation from the weeklies because it links the new Simon play with other Broadway hits and makes an interesting generalization about a certain kind of popular Broadway play. In a recent review of a Murray Schisgal play (All Over Town), which opened a few weeks after God's Favorite, Jack Kroll writes that

> Schisgal's play belongs to a kind of New Conservative black comedy that includes Neil Simon's new play, "God's Favorite," Bruce Jay Friedman's "Scuba Duba," Mel Brooks's "Blazing Saddles" and, at a higher level, Saul Bellow's "The Last Analysis." These comedies operate in that area where, as Bellow says, "laughter turns into insanity." The insanity these writers see is the breakdown of the old order with its comfortable certainties, now replaced... with 'strikes, revolution, anarchy, chaos.'
>
> The problem with much of this work is that the writers are really lamenting not the breakup of old faiths, but the comfort that has been lost with this breakup. Tragedy is the flea in the pelt of comedy, but in Simon, Friedman and Schisgal the real tragedy is the sheer inconvenience that urban middle-class chaps like themselves have to undergo as the old order changeth.[5]

The old order--if we can construct it from the seeming anxieties of Simon's characters--appears to be made up of washing machines, air-conditioners, stockings, uncollected garbage, cute apartments, etc. They add up to an idolatry of creature comforts, the worship of which is disturbed by the exigencies of life and by the presence of other people--landladies, neighbors, wives, fathers, and children.

Simon's plays are finally "tragedies of the middle class" posing as zany escapist entertainment. Perhaps it is the deception that bothers the critic because the plays do seem to contradict themselves.

The problem, I think, is both moral and aesthetic. In comedy the nature of the characters and the conflicts they experience are normally the platforms from which the humor is launched. The conflict, even in farce, ought to be established and apparently resolved. We don't need to be too serious about conflict in farce, of course, except in terms of the ending--the assumption being that one side overcomes the other and the other is reconciled to the new situation.

In Simon's plays, which operate without a clear thematic structure, the conflict is blurred. He begins each play with contrasting character types--one sloppy man vs. one neat man; one swinging bachelor vs. one shy young man; one radical and one patriot; one free spirit and one conservative, each apparently motivated, or defined rather, by slogans and a particular illusion about life. The goal or philosophy, if you will, of any particular character--protagonist or antagonist--has to do with appearances--one conforming, more or less, to the conventions of the old world, of neatness and comfortable financial success and the other experimenting with all kinds of freedom and the conventions (fads) of the new. Now the situation in which these disparate characters are located is of a serious and often sentimental nature and relates to problems of middle

age, marriage, divorce, identity, and, of course, sex and success; but the characters are not allowed to be serious about them for very long. These contrasting characters, then, representing trivial concerns, only suggest a conflict which will be resolved in an apparently "happy ending." Not unexpectedly, given this kind of fuzzy conflict, the plays will be resolved by compromise.

Simon manipulates his characters and his materials with certain devices which, sometimes in the performance of the plays with skillful direction and a certain type of actor, disguise the flaws in reasoning. In the text, however, Simon fails to accomplish the transformation from conflict to resolution. He appears to abandon the structural conflict until the end of the plays and to focus on the disparate natures of his characters. These contrasting attitudes, then, are the source of invective and vituperative and the primary tenor of his plays. Between the beginning and end, the plays are, more or less, impelled toward their destinations by a series of vaudeville routines.

Whatever the apparent conflict, Simon's plays conclude surreptitiously, on the side of conservatism. Each of the comedies I have examined ends--after having equivocated the conflict--in a return to the status quo. The characters have only changed hats with each other. The plays really should be satires; but the playwright conspires with his manic joking and diversionary tactics to outlaw reality, because reality would

necessitate recognition and change and the dismissal of illusions rather than equivocation, conversion and compromise.

Despite Simon's strategies which apparently delight his audiences, it may be that he depends too much on the realistic mode to depict his fantasies; and stage realism, even in comedy, makes certain thematic and technical demands which he ignores. Simon shares some of the problems of Arthur Miller's suffering characters. He continues in the later part of the 20th century to flirt with the American dream and his characters seem to want to have it both ways.

In the plays where Simon uses two contrasting men, brothers or friends, one of them compromises in some way his initial swinging bachelor position (usually to marriage) and the other quite without motivation takes up the characteristics or role of the one who marries (Horn, Girl, and The Odd Couple). There is much laughter and one boy always gets a girl. The happy ending or the new society which is usually formed at the end of comedies is thus in Simon not new, but only made to seem new.

The third one-act of Plaza Suite is a good example of this kind of switch or ambiguity in Simon. Financially successful parents, hard working urban New Yorkers, have rented rooms at the Plaza for their daughter's wedding. As the act begins, the daughter, Mimsey, is discovered locked in the bathroom and refusing to talk to her parents. This suggested conflict introduces thirty or so minutes of the parents pleading, threatening, feeling sorry for themselves, complaining about a torn stocking,

a ripped morning coat, the cost of the wedding ($8,000), the ingratitude of "college graduates," and having devoted their lives' effort to giving their daughter the fanciest wedding this side of Hollywood. This serious-cum-farcical situation climaxes in the father's venturing onto the hotel ledge to get to the bathroom window. After the gag situations have reached nadir or zenith, the girl agrees to see her father and tells him that she is afraid her marriage will be like theirs. This motive, viable as it may seem, introduces a serious idea and a sentimental moment. It is not, however, examined or transformed. Instead, the situation is undercut in a deadly fashion with a kind of joke. The parents send for the fiancé. He appears, cool and calm in his cutaway, is told of the situation, walks to the bathroom door and says, "Mimsey? ...This is Bordon...Cool it!" He then leaves the room, "without looking at the parents," and "without showing any more emotion." The girl comes out of the bathroom without a murmur and is glowingly ready for the wedding.

Farce and sentiment are mixed: absurd and pitiable situation-comedy parents do battle with a "spoiled darling" daughter; she introduces a soupçon of concern about the meaning of life; and the problem is resolved with a phrase: "Cool it." The expression may be contemporary but the behavior of the characters, including the young man, is finally banal and conservative. There is laughter in this play because Simon has exploited the surface of the familiar frenzy of weddings; but there is an underlying morbidity also because he has injected

into a skit about a wedding certain sordid complaints about life. If it is true that laughter arises from feelings of superiority, then these comedies are indeed cruel in their intentions. However, unlike Buster Keaton, these characters are unable to get up and walk away from the fall.

An exerpt from Oliver Goldsmith's essay, "A Comparison between Sentimental and Laughing Comedy" (1772), may be useful as an analogy here:

> Yet notwithstanding...the universal practice of former ages, a new species of dramatic composition has been introduced under the name of sentimental comedy, in which the virtues of private life are exhibited, rather than the vices exposed; and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the piece. These comedies have had of late great success, perhaps from their novelty, and also from their flattering every man in his favourite foible. In these plays almost all the characters are good, and exceedingly generous; they are lavish enough of their tin money on the stage; and though they want humour, have abundance of sentiment and feeling. If they happen to have faults or foibles, the spectator is taught not only to pardon, but to applaud them, in consideration of the goodness of their hearts; so that folly, instead of being ridiculed, is

> commended, and the comedy aims at touching our passions, without the power of being truly pathetic. In this manner we are likely to lose one great source of entertainment on the stage; for while the comic poet is invading the province of the tragic muse, he leaves her lovely sister quite neglected.[6]

The principle of Simon's technique, then, is to switch from any consistent consideration of an idea to a gag. In addition to this oscillation between the serious and the joke and the equivocal conflict between two opposite types with the same goal, many other devices support Simon's slight of hand. Multiple associations are made with the world outside the play: the characters are familiar types from other popular Broadway plays, television, the film, and the novel; the actors who perform in Simon's plays share the same familiarity; and the setting of each play in apartments in different areas of New York City--up-town, down-town, east and west sides--provides additional associations and instant familiarity with subjects not explored in the plays. And, finally, topical allusions to middle and lower class experience in New York City, to assorted news items, and to the world of fad and fashion of any given period fill the gaps in structure and give an appearance of reality.

An example from an early play may demonstrate Simon's principle of switching back and forth between opposites which

allows his characters, at the end of the action, to have it both ways. In Barefoot in the Park, a romantic, well-to-do, free spirited, sexy girl rents an apartment on the 5th floor (sixth counting the front stoop) which her newly-wed husband has not yet seen. Although climbing the stairs exhaustedly provides much of the comedy and takes up a certain amount of time, the conflict established is between craziness and stuffiness, between freedom and responsibility, between new fashions and old fashions. The adventurous girl has been known to walk barefoot in Central Park, but her new husband is a brief-case carrying young lawyer who gasps when he climbs the stairs and has no inclination or time for the new and adventurous. A neighbor is introduced. He is a 58-year-old bluebeard and lives in the attic above their flat. In order to get to his room, when he is locked out for non-payment of rent, he has to go through their bedroom window and walk along the ridge of the house to his attic. He is a foil for both the girl and her husband. This Victor doesn't puff when he climbs the stairs; in fact, he savors every moment of life. He even surpasses the girl in intensity of living. After an elaborate experience which consists of eating an "exotic" appetizer and traveling to Staten Island to eat an "exotic," if horrible, meal, the differences between the tired and stuffy husband and the fun-loving and apparently never-tiring Victor are made more than clear. Apparent differences in character climax in a quarrel which promises to dissolve the marriage. Suddenly, as if by magic, a happy ending is achieved.

The husband gets drunk, walks barefoot in the park (in February), and the girl, responding to her mother's advice and to love, is tamed.

Although this early play uses typical Simon devices and is generated by a conflict between old ways and new, it doesn't worry the critic because it is, perhaps, Simon's only straight romantic farce--the characters are young and goodlooking and the problems are minimal. The experience in Simon's other plays, however, is more serious and, often, tawdry. They are, therefore, more resistant to contrived happy endings: while one faction in the plays stresses bourgeois creature comforts and old world responsibility, the other flirts with bourgeois sins which, more often than not, hint at extra-marital sex. We seem, then, to have characters with the instincts of one order adopting temporarily the behavior of the prevailing new order.

Actually, Simon's characters all belong to the old order--both the middle-aged characters and the spoiled children; but they give lip service to whatever is topical in the new movements. Walking barefoot becomes a part of the conflict in Simon's second play written in 1963 at about the time that students in colleges were taking their shoes off all over the world. Criticizing LBJ, making jokes about LSD and "burning draft cards" are the topical allusions in Star Spangled Girl (1966).

The conflict in this particular play is, on the surface, one between two young men and a girl. The young men publish an avant garde magazine which criticizes the President, the Government,

the Establishment, etc.; the girl who provides the opposition and the sex is a 150% American Patriot. But these arm-chair radicals are at the same time hypocrits and chauvinists. They manipulate and patronize their women. The bulk of the play, a dozen absurd actions which are meant to define the sexual desire of one of the young men for the girl, is his pursuit of this sexy girl. The complications derive from her exasperation with him. The play ends with her falling inexplicably in love with the other young man who has not pursued her but who, in fact, has shouted at her and ordered her about. The response of Sophie in Girl is not unlike the response of Mimsey to Bordon in Plaza Suite. And the ending that undercuts the apparent conflict between old order and new order is the impending marriage of a pseudo-radical to the Star Spangled Girl. The curtain comes down on the girl singing the Battle Hymn of the Republic as she cleans the boys' apartment.

In Come Blow Your Horn, an early play, the hero is a swinging thirty-three-year-old bachelor. The first act defines him: he spends the act manipulating girls in and out of his apartment and resisting, via wisecrack, following in the footsteps of his angry plastic-fruit manufacturing father. At the end of the play, he will marry and "settle down," and his formerly shy brother will take up his bachelor habits and apartment. In Last of the Red Hot Lovers, a sad-looking, fat, middle-aged, married man tries, unsuccessfully, and self-pityingly, to have an affair in his mother's apartment between 3:30 and 5:00 with women he has

picked up (one to an act). This man salvages his desire for an affair at the end of the play by telephoning his wife to come to the apartment.

The plays, then, share, more or less, a certain subject matter and plot structure, have a veneer of topicality and are supported by gags, jokes, and absurd behavior.

Variations on the themes of unobtainable vain fantasies are played out; but the plays all end in the marriage bed, however devious and deceitful the way has been. The vagaries of sex and guilt, inadequacy and machismo (the plays are, to say the least, chauvinistic as well) have been circumscribed and made manageable.

Simon's plays are technically unsatisfying because he uses a disjointed tragi-comic story line with an enormous number of realistic and cliché details and verbal and sight gags to distract from the disjointed story. His exploitation of the familiar prevents exploration of the serious or the comic. For the same reasons, the plays are thematically unsatisfying. Simon finally doesn't create a myth. Instead he utilizes the details of several myths. This kind of topicality allows for an appearance of reality at the same time that it lessens its virulence. If Simon has a theme in his bag of tricks, it may be that he is trying "to justify the ways of man to God."

[1]The New York Times, December 22, 1974, p. 5.

[2]See Gerald M. Berkowitz's article, "Neil Simon and His Amazing Laugh Machine," Players 47:3, February, 1972.

[3]Newsweek, December 23, 1974, p. 56.

[4]The New Yorker, December 23, 1974, pp. 53-54.

[5]Newsweek, January 13, 1975, p. 51.

[6]Bernard F. Dukore, Dramatic Theory and Criticism (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.), 1974, p. 425.